

A Lucky Child

A Review

[Thomas Dalton](#)

by Thomas Buergenthal, Profile Books, London; 2009, 231pp.

The sad story of Holocaust ‘witnesses’ is well-known to revisionists. It is a tale of obscure individuals making outrageous claims of gassings and mass murder, often based on hearsay and rumor, often self-contradictory, and often in conflict with other witnesses, with material evidence, and even with the laws of physics. This is a serious problem for anyone seeking the truth about the Holocaust.

Auschwitz is of particular importance to the narrative, given its centrality in the Holocaust and the large number of survivors. There are a number of recorded witness statements and memoirs, but unfortunately virtually all of them contain serious flaws. Problems with accounts by those such as Wiesel, Vrba, Nyiszli, Frankl, Tauber, Mueller, and others have been well documented—I would refer the reader to Rudolf’s *Lectures on the Holocaust*, Mattogno’s *Bunkers of Auschwitz*, or my own book *Debating the Holocaust*.

To take one lesser known example of such problematic witnesses, consider the case of Yanina Cywinska. As reported in the *LA Times* (May 2, 1992), she was a “16-year-old Polish Roman Catholic girl” taken to Auschwitz along with her parents and brother. (They were sent for helping the Jews.) “She recalled being placed in a gas chamber naked along with her father.” Miraculously, young Yanina survived: “she was saved by a Jewish woman who gave her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.” Apparently this story wasn’t exactly correct, because the same newspaper reported a different version 11 years later. Now she was a 10-year-old at Auschwitz, where her parents and brother died in the chambers. She was sent there as well, “but because she was huskier than most children, Cywinska only passed out from the gas. A German revived her and put her to work” (August 17, 2003). Then in 2005 the story changed again. The *Quad-City Times* reported that “she survived the gas chamber when adult bodies fell on top of her, protecting her from inhaling a lethal amount of poison gas. Found moaning by Jewish slave laborers...she was resuscitated, given a uniform, and told to blend in with the others” (April 11). I haven’t the space to address the many problems with these reports; suffice to say that there was some heavy poetic license at work here, if not blatant falsification.

So we are fortunate now to have an unimpeachable witness in Dr. Thomas Buergenthal. Here we have an authoritative and trustworthy individual who has “devoted his life to international and human rights law,” according to his book cover. He has a Harvard law degree, and is currently serving as the American judge on the UN’s International Court of Justice. Clearly this is a man dedicated to truth, honesty, and openness—and so we are justified in holding his account of Auschwitz to a very high standard. True, he was a 10-year-old Jewish boy at the time (1944). But even so, this is the work of a mature and intelligent adult, and thus we can expect an honest and straightforward account of the happenings at that most infamous camp.

The first question is this: Why did he wait so long? In the preface Buergenthal explains that he wants to “recount [his] story to a wider audience [because] the Holocaust cannot be fully understood unless we look at it through the eyes of those who lived through it.” Fine, but why wait 65 years? He has published

books since the late 1960s; why wait so long for such an important story? The intervening years can only have obscured his memory—and to his credit he admits as much:

These recollections, I am sure, are colored by the tricks that the passage of time and old age play on memory: forgotten or inaccurate names of people; muddled facts and dates...; and references to events that did not happen quite as I describe them or that I believe I witnessed but may have only heard about. ... Also, I have found it difficult, if not impossible...to distinguish clearly between some events I actually remember witnessing and those I was told about by my parents or overheard them discuss. All I can say is that as I wrote about them, I seemed to remember them clearly as firsthand experiences. (p. xv; italics added)

Quite a disclaimer! But the author is now well covered for any discrepancies that may appear in the book.

Much of Buergethal's work is autobiographical, and only a few chapters relate directly to the Holocaust. Prior to his time at Auschwitz-Birkenau, a brief point of interest appears in his discussion of the Kielce ghetto. On two different occasions (pages 49 and 56) he speaks of the "liquidation" of the ghetto. Readers will likely be aware that traditionalists read this word as meaning 'mass murder' or 'extermination.' Perhaps the most notorious occurrence was in Goebbels' diary entry of March 27, 1942, in which he wrote that "60 percent [of the Jews in the General Government] will have to be liquidated." Rudolf and other revisionists have responded that 'liquidation' meant simply 'elimination or removal', not mass murder. Buergethal evidently agrees. He writes, "The ghetto was being liquidated, or, in the words bellowing out of the loudspeakers, "*Ausseidlung! Ausseidlung!*" ("Evacuation! Evacuation!)." And somewhat later: "After the liquidation of the labor camp, we were divided into two groups..." Obviously, not murder.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to Auschwitz. Here he recounts his time at Birkenau, the place where "millions of human beings died" (p. 64). Presuming this means at least two millions, Buergethal vastly overestimates even the current traditionalist thinking on this matter—which places total deaths at 1.1 to 1.25 million people (90% being Jews). Or perhaps this was an unconscious throwback to the pre-1990 days, when "four million people" allegedly died at Auschwitz.

Buergethal arrived in early August 1944, which would have been (according to the standard view) just after the mass gassing of the Hungarian Jews: some 400,000+ individuals gassed within a period of just two months—an astounding 50,000 per week, or over 7,000 per day. But he gives no indication whatsoever that any such monstrous event had just occurred.

After arrival he recounts the common storyline that, upon "selection," "the children, the elderly, and the invalids were...taken directly to the gas chambers." As luck would have it, "our group was spared the selection process. The SS officers...probably assumed, since our transport came from a labor camp [Henrykow], that children and others not able to work had already been eliminated" (p. 65)—but why assume anything? Were the SS unable to recognize a child when they saw one? Wouldn't every errant child, once spotted, be carted off for immediate gassing? Apparently not. Young Thomas and his father were then separated from his mother, but he would be reunited with her in late 1946. After a few months his father was taken away ("shipped out on a transport"), never to be seen again. So evidently all three Buergethals survived their stay at this most notorious 'death camp.'

Next he describes a standard delousing procedure: “we were marched toward a big building. Here we were ordered to take off our clothes and made to run through some showers and a disinfecting foot pool. Along the way, our hair was shorn off...” (p. 66). The boy then received his arm tattoo (“B-2930”). One cannot help but wonder why the Nazis would have bothered to delouse and tattoo a 10-year-old boy, unless they were trying to forestall a typhus outbreak, protect prisoners’ lives, and track their movements to the East. But this is precisely the revisionist thesis.

Young Thomas was first housed in the ‘Gypsy camp,’ which had recently been emptied: “all of them—men, women, and children—were murdered shortly before our arrival.” (So he knew about the Gypsies, but nothing on those 400,000 Hungarians?) What evidence he had for this belief, he does not say. He then describes a nighttime incident at the local infirmary, in which the SS are rounding up sick patients: “Of course, the patients knew they were being taken to the gas chambers, and we knew that the SS was thinning out the population of the infirmary to make room for new patients. They would do that every few weeks.” —a strange situation indeed.

Another interesting incident occurred one day when, as errand-boy for the Kapo of the sauna, he was ordered to pick up some “gas”:

[I was sent] to one of the crematoriums... We had to pick up the gas my sauna boss needed for the disinfection of clothes. ... When we got there, we were greeted by inmates who worked at the crematoriums. Their job was to remove the bodies from the gas chambers and burn them in the crematoriums. They were all strong young men who joked around with us, probably because they sensed that we were terrified to be so close to the gas chambers. ... [T]hey gave us some containers of gas to take back to the sauna. The person who had accompanied me thought that we had been given the same Zyklon gas that was used to kill people in the gas chambers. I have no way of knowing whether that was true, although it made some sense, considering that we got it from the crematorium. (pp. 75-76)

Some sense, but not much. Again, one is left to wonder what the conditions could have been in the camp, such that a Jewish child could just walk over to the crematoria and pick up some cans of deadly Zyklon from joking young men (Jews? Germans?), who were allegedly engaged in the process of killing thousands of people per hour.

A following observation by Buergethal supports the revisionist position, namely, the fact that the crematoria *smoked* when operating. “The air in Auschwitz always smelled foul because of the smoke that came out of the crematorium chimneys.” This is important, as we know, because operating, smoking chimneys would have been captured by air photos—but only one air photo (August 20, 1944) shows a single smoking chimney. The absence of smoking chimneys in nearly a dozen air photos suggests very little use of those incineration ovens. The air may have indeed “always” smelled foul, but the evidence suggests that this was not due to crematorium smoke. Certainly the photos show far too little of it to account for the alleged mass incinerations.

He incidentally also remarks on those infamous ‘flaming chimneys’ of Elie Wiesel: “Whenever the crematoriums were being operated at night, the sky above them would take on a reddish brown color” (p. 76). Perhaps some glowing ash reflected off the smoke, causing a bit of illumination—a situation that Wiesel records thusly: “we saw that flames were gushing out of a tall chimney into the black sky.” So perhaps there was a bit of truth behind Wiesel’s exaggerations.

After escaping temporarily from three more ‘selection’ events, he was finally corralled with 30 or 40 other men destined for the chambers. “I admitted to myself that there was no way out and that I would die in a few hours.” Soon an SS truck arrived. “At first the truck moved in the general direction of the crematoriums, but then it veered off slightly and entered the nearby *Krankenlager*, or hospital camp...” (p. 79). Why were they not gassed? “The SS had apparently concluded that it would be a waste of resources to take our small group to the gas chambers,” but instead held them “until they had put together a larger group.” Time passed; no “larger group” materialized. “I began to like my life in the hospital camp. *Maybe the SS forgot us*, I thought.” The only downside of hospital life was the late-night awakenings from “screams and pleas...as people were being herded into the [nearby] gas chambers.”

In time he was relocated to the “children’s barrack in Camp D” (so, it obviously was not quite true that “children...were taken directly to the gas chambers”). Buergenthal explains that the children were useful for garbage collection. On one of his trash runs he found his mother in the women’s camp. Not long afterward, he “heard that a large number of women, including [his] mother, had been sent to another camp in Germany” (p. 84). Odd that, in an alleged *extermination* camp, large numbers of Jews would be shipped elsewhere. And back to Germany, of all places!

His Auschwitz story concludes in “late December 1944 or early January 1945,” with a death march evacuation. (Final evacuation occurred on January 17.)

So, what can we conclude from Dr. Buergenthal’s account? I think that he was, in fact, quite a reliable witness—in terms of *the events that he actually observed*. Of what he actually claims to have seen, revisionists have very little to quarrel with: the many children in the camp, the movement between barracks, the peaceful time at the camp hospital, the periodic shipments of Jews out of the camp, the delousing procedure, the common use of Zyklon for disinfection, the smoking chimneys. It is only his *inferences* that are highly dubious—specifically, the assumption that people were being regularly gassed. No doubt this was the word around camp, and he is only relating this rumor. It is true that he heard those rumors; the *truth* of those rumors is another matter altogether.

Buergenthal’s high reputation and his straightforward, unexaggerated reporting of events make this book worth reading. It provides an unusual insight into daily life at Birkenau, and gives a picture that is at odds with much of the traditionalist account. Thus, in the end, Buergenthal seems a better ‘witness’ for revisionism than traditionalism. Let us hope that this does not get him in trouble with his fellow seekers of justice.

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